

Family Liaison Office

Direct Communication Project

Paper No. 31

Baby, You Can Drive My Car...: Guidelines for Getting a Driver's License

Teenagers who live overseas because of their parent's assignment to a U.S. Embassy or Consulate often find that they reach that magical birthday (normally 16) when they can apply for a driver's license, but can't actually get a license until they return to the U.S. While living abroad, these young people lack an opportunity to get classroom instruction in traffic laws and good driving habits and the behind-the-wheel practice that is required to obtain a license. Parents may worry that their children, eager to obtain that much coveted coming-of-age symbol, may be able to comply with requirements of the local Department of Motor Vehicles to get the license, but will lack the classroom preparation and practical experience that their U.S.-based peers have.

This paper offers suggestions for getting adequate instruction and appropriate driving practice based on advice from parents of Foreign Service teens who have successfully obtained a driver's license. It also gives current information on the basic requirements for obtaining a license in each of the Washington area's major jurisdictions.

Since the traffic rules are established by the individual states, there is no single set of driving rules to learn. Instead, would-be drivers in the U.S. are expected to master the traffic safety laws of the state where they live. Each state reserves the right to decide who

may have the privilege of driving on public roads, and each establishes the legal requirements that must be met to acquire a driver's license in that state.

The requirements to get a learner's permit and driver's license are different for people under 18 than they are for adults. In some states in the public high schools, teens receive free classroom instruction, including alcohol safety and drug awareness, but pay a fee for behind-the-wheel instruction. In others, teens get driver's education from commercial driving schools. Since driver's education is not generally offered in U.S. public schools, its cost is not covered by the Supplementary Instruction education allowance. (See subchapter 276.9 in the Standardized Regulations.)

Before You Return to the U.S.

Although it is usually not possible for teens overseas to get the driving practice that teens in the U.S. do, it is possible for them to prepare for the written examination of state driving laws while still overseas. Before returning to the U.S., it is a good idea to send for the handbook that all states publish for prospective drivers. Choose the state where the prospective driver expects to live. Available from the Department of Transportation, the Motor Vehicle Administration, or

the Department of Motor Vehicles, depending on the state, this is often called the Driver's Manual or Driver's Handbook, and will serve as the basic text for learning a state's driving laws. For addresses, consult a state and local government guide, available at most posts in the administrative section or the USIS library.

In addition, driver's education classroom instruction is available through a correspondence course (cost \$166) *entailing four assignments and two examinations* from the University of Nebraska - Lincoln Independent Study High School Program. They claim to meet the 30 hours of classroom instruction required by most insurance companies for a student discount and for student licensing by most states. Students will also need 6 or more hours behind-the-wheel instruction in most states. For more information, contact:

Department of Distance Education

University of Nebraska - Lincoln
Clifford Hardin Nebraska Center
for Continuing Education, Room 269
33rd & Holdrege Streets
Lincoln, NE 68583-9800

Telephone: 402-472-4321

Fax: 402-472-1901

Website: www.unl.edu/conted/disted.html

E-mail: unldel@unl.edu (lessons, inquiries) or dcereg1@unl.edu (enrollments)

Other useful publications are available from private American insurance companies. The American Automobile Association (AAA), a company which provides insurance and other services for drivers, offers a number of publications to members that may be useful to obtain while still overseas, including a combination video and manual, *Teaching Your Teen to Drive*. AAA also has a digest of motor laws with information on each state, available for \$9.95, plus \$1.65 shipping and handling, and a brochure from their Traffic Safety

Division, *How to Choose a Driving School*, that may be useful in do-it-yourself driver's education. For more information, contact:

AAA Mid-Atlantic
Traffic Safety Division
12600 Fair Lakes Circle
Fairfax, VA 22033
Telephone: 703-222-4200/1-800-763-6600
Fax: 703-222-5809

AAA members returning to states outside the Washington area should contact their local office.

Finally, Foreign Service parents who send their children to summer camp in the U.S. should know that many camps for older teens offer driver's education. Consult a guide such as Peterson's *Summer Opportunities for Kids and Teenagers* or contact an advisory service such as the National Camp Association in New York, 212-645-0653, to find these programs.

In the Washington Area

Dr. Gridlock, a regular columnist for *The Washington Post*, is often asked for advice from parents of young people who have just turned 16 and have a brand-new driver's license. In a recent column (*Ground Rules for Parents of New Drivers*, March 20, 1997), he offered a useful summary of recommendations, including these highlights:

- Local jurisdictions do not require enough behind-the-wheel training. Maryland and Virginia require 6 hours; the District of Columbia requires none. Dr. Gridlock thinks parents should require more. Idea: One Foreign Service family imposed its own requirement of logging 50 hours driving time, with a parent on city streets, country roads, at night, and in different demanding weather conditions before their teen was permitted to apply for the driver's license.

Driver's Education in Some Washington Area Public School Districts

Alexandria: one high school; 10th graders are required to take one term of classroom instruction.

Arlington County: three high schools offer a half-year course, including classroom, simulator, and behind-the-wheel (\$100 fee) instruction.

District of Columbia: high schools no longer offer driver's education.

Fairfax County: students at 23 high schools take one term of classroom instruction; behind-the-wheel training is offered after school (\$125).

Loudoun County: four high schools offer one term of classroom instruction, and 15 hours of behind-the-wheel training (\$125).

Montgomery County: high schools no longer offer driver's education.

Prince George's County: high schools offer a non-mandatory, after-school course that includes behind-the-wheel training (\$250).

Prince William County: seven high schools offer a non-mandatory term of classroom instruction only.

Source: *Collision Course: What's Happened Since Driver's Ed Hit the Skids* by David Mutch in *The Washington Post*; May 18, 1997

Car Guys

Telephone: 800-800-4897

Fax: 540-774-8823

Website: www.carguys.com

E-mail: carguys@aol.com

Students who have a learner's permit and already know how to drive may take a 1-day course (8:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m.) at the Manassas Campus of Northern Virginia Community College. This includes classroom instruction in over- and under-steering, proper use of anti-lock brakes, facts about reaction times, and a half-day in a skid car with a trained instructor. Cost: \$200.

BSR Inc.

Telephone: 304-725-6512

Fax: 304-728-7124

Website: www.bsr-inc.com

E-mail: office@bsr-inc.com

This company prefers students with at least 6 months of driving experience, but will consider exceptions. They offer a 1-day course at their facility near Charles Town, West Virginia, about 2 hours from Washington. After 1 1/2 hours of classroom instruction, students spend 5 1/2 hours in the skid car learning braking and car control skills, plus how to cope with different road surfaces. Cost: \$312.70.

Note: *FLO does not endorse these courses, but is providing contact information as a convenience.*

- In addition to the basic course, consider a defensive driving course that could provide a wake-up call for overconfident yet inexperienced teens. Idea: Sign your teen up for a 1-day accident-avoidance course. This is good for Washington area teens who have a learner's permit and basic car driving skills or for college students during a home leave visit to Washington.

- There is no consensus on the best vehicle safety features: some parents tell Dr. Gridlock they insist on large cars, clunkers that wrap a heavy frame around the driver and passengers; others say teens are better off in smaller cars that maneuver easily. Dr. Gridlock prefers a car with an air bag and then matching the size of the car to the teen's own comfort level and preference.

- Finally, Dr. Gridlock points out that parents need to be heavily involved in the decision on when to permit their child to apply for the learner's permit and, later, the driver's license as they have the best perspective on their child's maturity.

A Foreign Service parent has a good tip for **parents of children with special needs**. She called a nationally-renowned Washington private school for children with learning disabilities for their recommendation for a behind-the-wheel instructor skilled in working with children who learn differently.

Getting a Driver's License

The District of Columbia, Maryland, and Virginia all require a first-time applicant (under age 18) for a driver's license to get a learner's permit first. A permit allows drivers to operate a vehicle when accompanied by a licensed adult.

While there are differences in details, generally to get a learner's permit applicants must meet the local eligibility requirements by bringing the following documentation to the local full-service department of motor vehicles:

- proof of age, identity, and residency;
- for those under 18, proof of their parents' permission to apply for a permit; and
- in MD and VA, proof of successful completion of a driver's education course.

At the department of motor vehicles, applicants must:

- fill out an application form;
- pass a written test on traffic laws and safety rules;
- pass an eye examination; and
- pay fees.

For the driver's license, a first-time applicant who has never had a valid license in another state must also take a road test.

Applicants intending to apply for a permit or license in one of the Washington area jurisdictions should obtain a copy of the appropriate Driver's Manual for that state's specific requirements. The information that follows, including where to write for a Driver's Manual, highlights important requirements and shares advice from Foreign Service parents whose children have obtained permits or licenses in the Washington area.

District of Columbia:

Eligibility: The age requirement is 16. The District does not require a driver's education course or behind-the-wheel training.

What to Bring for a Learner's Permit: Applicants under 18 should bring:

- original birth certificate or certified copy;
- Social Security card or other proof of Social Security number;
- notarized consent form signed by parents;
- proof of residency; a copy of last year's report card from a local school **or** a copy of a lease or deed plus a notarized statement from the applicant's parents that s/he resides with them.

Where to Apply: Learner's permits are issued in:

Central Office
Bureau of Motor Vehicles
Room 1157, Municipal Center
301 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20001

Write this office for a *Driver's Manual* and study guides. For the location of the nearest station where licenses are issued and for other

information about licenses and permits, call 202-727-6680.

Watch Out For: Even when parents accompany the applicant, notarized copies of their consent forms are required. A notary is available at the Municipal Center. When calling for information, expect an automated menu of pre-recorded advice. Take a book or other amusements along when appearing for the permit application. Be patient.

The Road Test: Make an appointment by calling 202-727-6580. To speed this step, the applicant should request a road test appointment at the same time as obtaining the learner's permit. Otherwise, there may be another wait of several weeks because of the backlog of appointments. All road tests for the DC license originate at Brentwood Road and W Streets NE. Instructions concerning the road test will be provided at the time an appointment is made.

Maryland:

Eligibility: The age requirement is 15 years and 9 months. For the driver's license, an applicant must have successfully completed 30 hours of an approved driver education course and 6 hours of behind-the-wheel training. An applicant may apply for the driver's license any time from four months after getting the permit up to its expiration date of one year.

What to Bring for a Learner's Permit: Applicants under 18 should bring:

- original birth certificate or certified copy;
- actual Social Security card;
- written consent from parents;
- driver's education course certificate; and additional form of identification such as a passport that shows full name, date of birth, and a signature.

Where to Apply: For the nearest Motor Vehicle Administration office, call 800-950-1682 in Maryland. From out of state, call 301-729-4550. For driver's education courses, consult the *Yellow Pages* under *Driving Instruction* and be sure to ask if the course has been approved by the MVA. For a copy of the *Maryland Driver's Handbook* and the *Guide For Parents of Beginning Drivers*, write to:

Maryland Department of Transportation
Motor Vehicle Administration
6601 Ritchie Highway NE
Glen Burnie, MD 21062

Watch Out For: Maryland permits and licenses come with an "Alcohol Restriction" for drivers under age 21 that provides for the loss of a license if the driver attempts to drive after having as little as one drink. Applicants under age 21 but over 18 who have never held a license in any state must complete a 3-hour Alcohol and Drug Education course. Contact the MVA for information about this course.

Applicants between the ages of 16 and 18 are issued a provisional license that requires maintaining a good driving record for 12 months before applying for a regular license. A parent, guardian or supervising driver must submit a completed and signed practice log documenting a minimum of 40 hours of supervised driving for applicants. Young drivers with this provisional license may not drive between the hours of 12 a.m. and 5 a.m. unless accompanied by a licensed adult. Maryland can suspend or revoke a provisional license for a variety of reasons. On their 18th birthday, drivers can trade this license for a regular driver's license.

The Road Test: Make an appointment by calling 888-212-4709. The applicant returns to the Maryland branch office where the learner's permit was obtained to take the road test.

Virginia:

Eligibility: The age requirement for a learner's permit is 15. The age requirement for a driver's license is 16. Applicants who are 16 and 17 must have successfully completed a state-approved driver's education program consisting of 36 periods of classroom work and 14 in-car periods (7 hours observation, 7 hours driving) and have held a learner's permit **for 6 months**.

What to Bring for a Learner's Permit: Applicants under 18 should bring:

- original birth certificate or certified copy;
- actual Social Security card;
- proof of Virginia residency, parent's Virginia driver's license, for example;
- written consent from parents; and
- proof of local school enrollment with good academic standing (call ahead to verify what proof is acceptable in lieu of this).

Where to Apply: The 24-hour information number for the Division of Motor Vehicles is 703-761-4655. It offers touch-tone selection to reach a customer service representative who will tell you the location closest to you.

Watch Out For: Even though the *Driver's Manual* states that a Social Security card is not required, a number of Foreign Service parents have reported that it is very important to take the actual Social Security card along when applying for a permit as no other proof will be accepted. If you don't have the Social Security card, it can take up to 6 weeks to obtain a replacement. This delay in applying for the learner's permit must be added to the 6 months a Virginia driver must hold the permit before seeking the regular license.

The Virginia school system offers driver's education in the sophomore year only. A teenager who returns in the junior or senior year will have to go to an approved driving school or take the course through a county adult education class. The school system also offers behind-the-wheel training, but for a fee that is comparable to the price of a commercial program. One benefit of going to a private company is that some will pick up and return students home according to the client's schedule. Students normally take the road test at the end of the behind-the-wheel course. One Foreign Service parent highly recommends returning early in the summer with an older teen in order to complete this 50-hour driver's education course

If you are under the age of 18, the state of Virginia can suspend or revoke your license if you are involved in any alcohol or juvenile crime-related circumstances.

The Road Test: Appointments are not required for the road test. Call 703-761-4655 for the testing center closest to you.

Final Note: Cost

Although there are variations among the District, Maryland, and Virginia, expect to pay fees. The cost for learner's permits and driver's licenses will range from approximately \$10 to \$30. Ask for fees when you call for location.

You can expect to pay approximately \$150 to \$250 for each driver's education course. Prices vary among schools so it's worth it to comparison shop.

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Education and Youth Officer